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SUBJECT: NICARAGUA: CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADER HIGHLIGHTS LACK
OF JUSTICE AND MORAL VALUES

REF: A. MANAGUA 2008 761
[1](#)B. MANAGUA 2007 01904

Classified By: Ambassador Paul A. Trivelli for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Influential Catholic Church leader Monsignor Bernard Hombach, the German-born Bishop of Granada, privately reaffirmed his concerns about Nicaragua,s fragile democracy, absence of justice, politicization of government institutions, and erosion of moral values. While acknowledging the troubled political situation, Hombach remains staunchly opposed to any Church involvement in politics. Although some prominent religious leaders have joined the civil society chorus calling for a national dialogue, in Hombach,s estimation it would be a waste of time because Nicaragua has no coherent political opposition. Hombach expressed a general lack of faith in the Nicaraguan political class,s ability to solve the real problems facing Nicaragua, and underscored the need to restore values of social justice to put the country on the right path. END SUMMARY

CHURCH AND POLITICS SHOULDN'T MIX
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[1](#)2. (C) During a July 11 visit with Poloff, Monsignor Hombach explained that the Church,s role is not to meddle in politics nor identify with any particular political party, but rather to demonstrate a positive image for the people. He objected to many of the actions by the Ortega government and the Sandinista National Liberation Front,s (FSLN) partisan control of state institutions, but the Catholic Church needs to stay out of politics, Hombach insisted. Bishops who side with or oppose any one party are making a mistake, although he confided that not all church leaders share this point of view. (Note: In a recent interview with leading center-right La Prensa, Bishop Hombach criticized the Council of Peace and Reconciliation, administered by retired Cardinal Obando y Bravo, which he judged had accomplished nothing and whose existence was &unnecessary.8 End Note.) The Church has no business being &married8 to any party, be it on the left or the right, but must instead serve as an independent arbiter of justice and morality. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the Church,s duty is to uphold its principles to serve God not the politicians. The Church did have an obligation to be alert to any wrongdoings by the government against the people. In his view, however, the criticism must not be to antagonize or create enemies, but rather to pressure the government to keep its commitment to ending the country,s social problems.

LACK OF JUSTICE, PARTISANSHIP, PACTO HAMPER REAL DEMOCRACY

13. (C) Monsignor Hombach was especially perturbed about the lack of justice in Nicaragua and found it astounding that one party, the FSLN, could have exclusive control of the country's legal institutions, the courts, and the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE). The justice system in Nicaragua is managed primarily by partisan interests, he explained, rather than out of any respect for truth or ethics, and the highest judicial positions are doled out as rewards for party loyalists. In Hombach's view, the partisan monopoly was preventing Nicaraguan democratic forces from flourishing while enabling corruption.

14. (C) Offering his perspective on the relationship between President Ortega and former president and convicted felon Arnaldo Aleman of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), Hombach likened them to Siamese twins who were paralyzing true democracy.⁸ Although Ortega is a poor administrator, he is a Machiavellian politician. With justice in the hands of the Sandinistas, they have Aleman chained up like a dog.⁸ According to Hombach, as long as Daniel Ortega is in power, Aleman, who is ostensibly under house arrest, will never be free because he is Ortega's most valuable card.⁸

He observed that Ortega places people who are corrupt but obedient in key positions. For example, Roberto Rivas, president of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), is not even a true Sandinista, Hombach noted, but is willing to carry Ortega's water out of convenience and personal opportunism. Arnaldo Aleman, meanwhile, would never put anyone in a position of authority he deemed more capable than himself. Hombach judged that Nicaragua was prone to corruption and dependency on outsiders, largely due to its history of caudillismo and tradition of "the Gueguense," the Nicaraguan custom of wearing "two different masks."

PARISHIONERS SHARE CONCERNS

15. (C) Reflecting on the state of Nicaragua's democratic development, Hombach relayed the concerns he has heard from members of his congregation. Many Granada parishioners have expressed frustration about the closure of democratic space and the controversial CSE ruling to block minority political parties from participating in the November 2008 municipal elections (Ref. A.) Some citizens have grown disillusioned with the democratic process and lamented that they have no one for whom to vote. Hombach emphasized that the manipulation of the Nicaraguan electoral process is nothing new. He recounted previous elections rife with fraud, and noted the frustration of having reported several instances of electoral abuse directly to CSE president Roberto Rivas who has simply ignored his complaints.

LOSS OF VALUES AND ETHICS

16. (C) Hombach stressed that the Catholic Church views the problems facing Nicaragua, particularly the failure of justice, within the larger context of the loss of societal and moral values rather than as a result of political tension. Hombach was indignant about the impunity often afforded to drug traffickers and perpetrators of sexual violence and child abuse, and noted many parishioners had sought his counsel on dealing with the issue of intrafamily violence, a serious problem throughout Nicaragua. Because of the lack of an independent judiciary, many cases go unresolved or are treated with impunity. The bishop was clear that no one, not even priests, should be exempt from punishment in cases involving child abuse. He cited one disturbing case of a step-father who had raped his own step-daughter, but instead of justice being served, the girl was blamed for "lying about" the allegations. According to Hombach, the Church had a duty to defend and teach ethics and moral values because although laws exist, laws can't change human behavior. The bishop also lamented that as a consequence of societal tolerance of child abuse, Granada is

gaining a reputation as a popular destination for child sex tourism among foreign travelers. (NOTE: A representative of a Granada-based NGO involved in defending the rights of women and children informed poloff separately that Monsignor Hombach is playing a prominent role in the fight to stop sexual abuse and exploitation of children in the community, praising his advocacy of this cause. END NOTE.)

PASTORAL LETTER TO URGE END TO INJUSTICE

17. (C) In contrast to other church leaders who have called for a national dialogue as a means for dealing with the country's political, economic, and social crises, Hombach demurred that it did not make any sense given the absence of real political opposition. He suggested that the lack of an opposition leadership is even more of a problem than Daniel Ortega. Politicians in Nicaragua don't have principles, he judged, and many National Assembly deputies are opportunists who people can't trust because they change from one party to another. A national dialogue would just turn into a monologue, and no one would listen.⁸ Rather than demand a national dialogue, Hombach was in favor of the Church sending a pastoral letter to the Nicaraguan people, to urge reconciliation, address poverty and hunger, and to demand that politics be practiced as a "noble art, with noble people." He indicated plans to do so at some point in August. Furthermore, although he expressed admiration for the strength of the ecumenical dialogue on the Atlantic Coast, he lamented that this spirit was weak in the rest of the country and regretted that tensions between the Catholic Church and evangelical communities exacerbate divisions among people.

COMMENT

18. (C) While Hombach remains steadfast in objecting to direct Church involvement in politics, he was clearly more critical of the Ortega government than he had been a year ago (Ref. B). He is aware that everything is politicized in Nicaragua, but seeks to maintain a distinction between criticizing the injustices of the government and criticizing or defending political figures or parties. His complaints mirror the many voiced by democratic opposition groups, human rights organizations, media, and civil society contacts. Given recent public opinion polling showing both the Catholic and Evangelical Churches as inspiring considerably greater confidence among the population than state institutions and many political figures, Monsignor Hombach's insistence on keeping a distance from politics is probably both prudent and understandable.

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